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Dock Box Services owner Dino Forgione, left, and mechanic Frank Krmel Sr. have been busy with maintenance work. Higher lake levels mean more boaters and more repairs.

Lake St. Clair rises, but levels are still below average

Boaters relax some; fewer run aground

By Tony Manolatos and Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

HARRISON TOWNSHIP -- Belle Maer Harbor owner Marc Howard has had a keen eye on the fluctuating water levels on Lake St. Clair in recent years.

The Harrison Township marina owner saw that seemingly drought-like conditions nearly three years ago were causing the water levels on the lake to drop. That prompted Howard to become one of the first to dredge a harbor on the lake to ensure boaters would have easy ingress and egress.

Things -- and water levels -- have changed.

Lake St. Clair still is 6 inches below average for the month of August -- but 9 inches above the water level last year at this time, according to the U.S.



Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News

Lake St. Clair is still 6 inches below average. The shallow water increases the risk of damage to boats.

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Army Corps of Engineers. With the higher water on the lake, businesses and boaters are having a stronger year.

"It is a better summer than last year," Howard said. "People got their confidence back with higher levels. "The gas dock guy has a big smile on his face for the first time in a few years."

In the spring of 2001 -- after four years of less than average precipitation -- the Great Lakes fell to their lowest point in 35 years. Water in Superior, Michigan, Huron and Erie remain below normal. Lake St. Clair is fed by water from lakes Michigan and Huron.

But heavy rains last October and November helped Lake St. Clair and the other Great Lakes, which also are higher this year than in 2001, said Keith Kompoltowicz, a meteorologist with the Army Corps of Engineers.

"It's good news, but boaters still need to be cautious because the water levels are still below average," said Kompoltowicz, who recommends carrying current charts showing water levels.

Kompoltowicz forecasts below-average water levels for the rest of the year, but they still will be higher than last year.

No surprise

Howard isn't really surprised.

At the start of this boating season, he observed the water levels were higher than in previous years and that weather experts were calling for heavy rains early this year across the Western Hemisphere.

When water levels are low, boaters have to be careful where they navigate on Lake St. Clair. Some spots become too shallow for sailboats with long keels, even for some rudders and propellers. The problem especially has been tough on people living along canals that feed into the lake. Even boats that require only shallow water have had tough times getting through.

Owners of large boats also have had trouble docking in marina slips, or going through canals because of the risk of damaging their hulls.

Marina owners, like Howard, resorted to expensive dredging -- removal of sediment on the water bottom -- so boats could get into and out of the facilities.

"I didn't have to worry about dredging this year, so it's helped us," said Ann Miller, owner of Miller Marina in St. Clair Shores. "And the boaters are a little more relaxed this year."

Low water

While the water level on Lake St. Clair has increased, there are still areas that could pose a danger to boaters.



Source: Macomb County Sheriff's
Department Marine Division.

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Miller spent more than \$150,000 to dredge parts of her marina last year and the year before.

Business at the marina was slow in the spring, Miller said. But it's picked up considerably. Only 30 of the 351 boat wells at the marina are open. The others are being rented.

Fewer groundings

The higher water also has meant fewer boats running aground in shallow areas.

The U.S. Coast Guard went on two or three reports of grounded boats each week on Lake St. Clair last summer. So far this summer, the coast guard has done about two or three grounding runs per month.

"People seem to be more responsible out there, but most of it is the water levels ... they're way up this year," Chief Petty Officer Terry Lathrop said.

Fewer boats are being brought into repair shops because fewer are running aground, but business still is up at Dock Box Services in St. Clair Shores. Boat repairs are up 50 percent at the shop because more boats are on the lake than in last year, service manager Vic Rohr said.

"The high water has a lot to do with it, but we've had some great weekend weather too," Rohr said.

While recreational boaters are enjoying the rising waters, only more years of higher water will please officials in the Great Lakes freighter industry.

Glen G. Nekvasil, spokesman for the Lakes Carriers' Association, a Cleveland-based group that represents freight companies, said it will take years of high water levels to offset losses over recent years.

Freighters have had to carry smaller loads so as not to get caught up in shallow water. Smaller loads translate into smaller profits.

In 1997, the largest freighters on the lakes could carry 70,000 tons of cargo, Nekvasil said. In 2000, the same freighters could only carry 60,000 tons. This year, the ships are able to haul as much as 66,000 tons.

"The (Great) Lakes have come back a lot quicker than people thought, but there's still room for improvement," Nekvasil said.

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